

IS THERE A SOUTHERN RENAISSANCE?

BY HOWARD MUMFORD JONES

I

ALITERARY prognosis of the United States reveals, I believe, something like the following. The cycle of literary production in the Middle West has reached a pause: the poets who created the renaissance of 1910—Sandburg, Masters, Lindsay—exhibit no new developments and have raised up few followers; and the great line of western novelists, of whom Garland and Robert Herrick are the deans, has dwindled into Glenway Westcott in the younger generation, and risen to Willa Cather in the intermediate group. Aside from the sardonic verses of Robinson Jeffers and the denunciations of Upton Sinclair, no new voice reaches us from the Pacific coast. New York is given over to “personality” novels, experimental plays, and mystery stories. New England continues to cherish Robert Frost and E. A. Robinson, but the younger poetic group—Wilbert Snow, James Whaler, and the rest—are not writers of great power, and though that region furnishes its usual quota of essayists and novelists, it has nothing distinctive to say. Finally, the writers of intellectual prose and poetry must be counted in the total picture, albeit they owe allegiance to no particular region.

In the South, however, there is a distinct re-birth of letters. Southern names—Cabell, Mrs. Peterkin, Isa Glenn, Ellen Glasgow, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Maristan Chapman—are high in the list of distinguished contemporary novelists; a southern dramatist, Paul Green, seems to some a writer who may one day stand beside Eugene O'Neill; and a distinguished group of books by DuBose Heyward, Howard Odum, Robert R. Moton, Mrs. Peterkin, E. C. L.

Adams, Roark Bradford and others, has presented Negro life outside the usual conventions of sentimentality. Moreover, the southerners are also writing important biographies: Winston's "Andrew Johnson," John Donald Wade's "Life of Augustus Baldwin Longstreet," Allen Tate's "Jefferson Davis." In poetry and criticism the South, of course, is still behind, but there is ground for the pride which Dixie takes in its new writers.

Of course this survey is full of obvious imperfections. It does not take into account the criticism of Paul E. More, the novels of Theodore Dreiser, "John Brown's Body," Eugene O'Neill, the critical work of Lewis Mumford, and much more. But still as a rough estimate, it is fair enough; the writers who are already established in the North and West are not likely to show any important new developments; their orbits are fixed, their worth and height are known, whereas, on the contrary, most of the important southerners are still in a process of development. One may reasonably argue that the South is the literary land of promise today.

But while the South is justifiably proud of its achievements, few intelligent southerners are wholly pleased with their general literary development. More southern authors are writing books, but, so far as the sale of these books is concerned, publishers find that most southern states do not count importantly, and that some of them do not count at all. The lack of literary agencies in Dixie like *The Saturday Review* and *The Bookman* means that the southern author has still to wait on metropolitan recognition before being accepted by his home folks; and though book-reviewing is brilliantly done by Donald Davidson and others in southern newspapers, and though southern literary quarterlies like *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The Sewanee Review*, and *The Southwest Review* print as good criticism as can be found in the country, the average southerner does not care passionately for reading.

Moreover, it is to be remarked that although a great deal of promising work is coming from the pens of younger southern writers—and by promising, I mean work which has freshness of point of view, and charm of style—one who seeks to measure the fundamental brainwork in these productions by the philosophic richness of much European work in the contemporary movement, concludes that if the South is the American land of promise in letters, southern letters are still a little thin, a little lacking in ideas. The theme of the crumbling of the generations is one which comes home closely to the South, but no southerner has created a novel as solid as Thomas Mann's "Buddenbrooks." No southern writer has revolutionized the methods of fiction as Proust and James Joyce have revolutionized fiction; no southern poet compares in intellectual virility to T. S. Eliot; no southern dramatist is significant as Shaw or Pirandello is significant; no aesthete in the South is as subtle as Croce; no historian is as erudite and profound as Spengler. The ironies of Mr. Cabell do not differ greatly from those of Anatole France; the admirable novels of Ellen Glasgow are after all in the tradition of admirable novels; the southern biographer simply accepts the patterns of Strachey and Gamaliel Bradford; and the southern historian is inclined to enjoy the writings of Mr. Claude G. Bowers because they express his own point of view.

The South is not blameworthy in this regard; it does extraordinarily well; but if it be true that the most promising literary group in the country is the southern group, it becomes a matter of some interest to inquire what promise the South holds out for deeper work; and to ask, when contemporary southern literature is so good, why it is not better. It is a question of concern, not merely to southerners, but to all who are interested in the next stages of our national literary development.

II

Why are southern letters not richer in content? The

quest for an answer pushes us back into an historical explanation. Sometimes the conventional answers are those given to the question why our national letters are not richer than they are; sometimes the answer is in terms of southern history. We are, for example, frequently told that the United States is still too young to have produced a great literature. Why a nation should be too youthful to produce a rich literary tradition, and yet be mature enough to have given birth to Franklin, Hawthorne, Poe, Emerson, Melville, Thoreau, and Whitman within a period (reckoned from birth-date to birth-date) of 113 years does not appear. Or we are told that the South is too poor to support the arts. But the same persons who advance this theory point with pride to the long cultural traditions of southern families, to the libraries collected by Virginia aristocrats, Charleston merchant-princes, and Louisiana planters, and take pride in their family portraits, their breeding, and their traditions. Indeed, historical research seems to prove that an interest in the arts was quite as widespread in the South as in New England; the New Englanders happened to catch the national attention first.

More frequently one hears the familiar tale of the economics of the slavery system, the poverty of the Civil War, and the social upheaval of the Reconstruction Era. No one acquainted with the facts (and, after "The Tragic Era," who lacks some acquaintance with them?) but must admit that the social and economic evils of reconstruction days were immense. At the same time, there is a good deal of sentiment and self-pity in the southern mind when this era is concerned. If Professor Allan Nevins is right, the southern people, by the end of the seventies, "were better educated, better clothed, better governed, and more thoughtful and alert" as a whole than when "the incubus of slavery, with all the fictitious wealth it represented, rested upon their shoulders." Moreover, as the populist movements, Hamlin Garland's autobiographical books, and some

seventy novels picturing social unrest in the years from 1880 to 1900 exist to prove, the North and West were passing through a severe economic upheaval also; and the hopeless lives of western farmers, the hopeless lives of the submerged tenth in the great cities, the hopeless rebellion of the laboring classes drew Crane and Garland and Howells and Wyckoff and Norris into a mood of righteous indignation that such things could be.

But it is also argued that the spiritual shock of the Reconstruction Era left the southern author without energy to write, without an audience to listen to him, and without anything significant to say. The argument would be better if it were in accord with the facts. As a matter of history, the Reconstruction Era is a period of great energy among southern literary men. In the middle of it Lanier did his best work. Timrod's poems were published in 1873. Paul Hamilton Hayne brought out volumes of verse in 1872 and 1875, and a collected edition in 1882. In 1865 Albion W. Tourgee settled in North Carolina where he remained until 1881; and during these years he published "Figs and Thistles," "A Fool's Errand," and "Bricks without Straw," all having to do with reconstruction problems. Frank O. Ticknor, author of "Little Giffin of Tennessee," wrote all his best work during the war or just after; his book was itself published in 1879. Richard Malcolm Johnston published his "Georgia Sketches" in 1864 and his "Dukeborough Tales" in 1871. Joel Chandler Harris began his Uncle Remus stories in 1880. Mary N. Murfree (Charles Egbert Craddock) began writing in the seventies, and published her first contribution to the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1878. The lives of southern authors were full of hardship; but literature is counted in terms of books, and there was no lack of important literary work in the South during the reconstruction years.

The reason is obvious. Northern publishers, eager and curious to know about the "new south," assisted the new

group of writers by exploiting their contributions. Edward King, sent by Scribner's Monthly to make a tour of that region for his "Great South" papers, encouraged George W. Cable to transfer his work from the New Orleans Picayune to northern magazines; and in 1873 Cable was receiving letters from Richard Watson Gilder to the effect that "you have the makings of one of the best story-writers of the day," and the incident is typical. When the Civil War broke out, Thomas Nelson Page was an eight-year-old boy on a Virginia plantation. "He had been born," says a critic, "at precisely the right moment. He had been a part of the old régime during the early impressionable years . . . and he was young enough when the era closed to adapt himself to the new order." His pictures of Virginia life won a ready market in the North. Irwin Russell preceded Cable in Scribner's Monthly by one year; his first pictures of the plantation darkey were published in that periodical in 1876. In 1888 Tourgee was writing in The Forum:

It cannot be denied that American fiction of to-day, whatever may be its origin, is predominatingly Southern in type and character. . . . A foreigner studying our current literature, without knowledge of our history, and judging our civilization by our fiction, would undoubtedly conclude that the South was the seat of the intellectual empire in America and the African the chief romantic element of our population.

The notion that the reconstruction time was a period of lean years in southern letters seems to have little foundation in fact.

III

Doubtless this literature had its defects—we are just now in no mood to appreciate its solid virtues—but it was taken seriously in its own day, and supplemented as it was by the vigorous social thinking of Grady and Hill and Vance, its problems were much like those of the contemporary move-

ment, its virtues and defects much like those of the literature of our time. It does not give us the answer to our question. Let us go further back into the history of the South.

Observers sometimes seek to explain the relative weakness of southern letters by the romanticism which accompanied a slavery economy. Mark Twain furnished the key phrase when he said that the novels of Sir Walter Scott ruined the South. Certainly a faded and elegant Byronism, a sham romantic chivalry were much in vogue during the palmy days of the Cotton Kingdom. The falsities of the historical novels of William Gilmore Simms, the vague, high-sounding rhetoric of poets like Thomas Holley Chivers, the elegant emptiness of the "literary essays" in the short-lived southern magazines are all documents in the case. Then as now the South, viewing literature as an elegant amusement, failed to support its literary men: Poe fled north, and the biography of so typical a figure as Dr. George William Bagby of Virginia is filled with complaints of southern indifference to his career.

The facts are true, but they are not all the facts. The disease was national. The historian Schouler described American literary taste in the first quarter of the last century as "squeamish, affected, finical, full of classical pretensions, the toad-eater of the rich and patronizing to the poor, inane, wholly out of sympathy with American democracy," and Schouler wrote long before Mr. Mencken. McMaster dubs the same period "the puerile age of our literature." Reminding us that the most popular poet was Longfellow, Mr. Van Wyck Brooks also reminds us that he had a "pale-blue, melting nature." Mr. John Macy dismisses our literature of this whole epoch as "idealistic, sweet, delicate, nicely finished." The picture is exaggerated, the emphasis is bad, but if southern letters have been blamed for sentimentalism, I can not see that they differed greatly from American literature elsewhere in the same years. The one great exception was the New England group, who furnished us "our golden day."

But the South, too, was having a golden day of its own. Thomas Jefferson could not foresee the industrialization of the United States, and doubtless his theory of an agricultural democracy had its naïve aspects, but Professor Chinard has just written a book to prove that he is one of the great political thinkers of the United States and of the world. His theories, modified to fit the peculiar institutions of the South, formed the basis of one of the most carefully articulated social structures the nation has ever seen; and it is significant that the anti-Hamiltonian doctrine of the great Virginian triumphed in politics to such an extent that between 1828 and 1860 the Democrats won every presidential election save two; and that, in these two cases (Harrison in 1840 and Taylor in 1848), the milk of victorious Whiggery was watered with Jeffersonianism.

The triumph of the Democrats meant that the Cotton Kingdom came into its own. To the articulation and defence of that system, which in our day has drawn the admiration of Professor William E. Dodd and Mr. Allen Tate, some of the finest brains of the nation were drawn. The sole rivals of Webster in the great triumvirate which make memorable the history of the Senate were Calhoun and Clay. The politics and society of the southern system found their defenders in these men and in brilliant orators like them, such as Hayne. The economics of slavery raised up a brilliant defender in Dew of Virginia—one of the few original thinkers in this field that America has produced. Mr. Allen Tate quotes from William Harper's "Memoir on Slavery" (1838) the following sentence:

To constitute a society a variety of offices must be discharged, from those requiring the very lowest degree of intellectual power to those requiring the very highest. It should seem that the endowments ought to be apportioned according to the exigencies of the situation. And the first want of a society is leaders,

and remarks with some irony that this sentence might have

been written by the modern American "humanists." The South anticipated their program by some eighty years.

Moreover, the parts of the Cotton Kingdom were all in good working order. There was a direct inter-relation between politics, the bar, and the training of students in law and in the liberal arts. In 1860 there were some 19,000 college students in the South, not to speak of those who went North to college; the East had only 10,500, Middle and New England states included. The University of North Carolina had to wait until the twentieth century to graduate a class larger than that which left it a few years before the Civil War. The University of Virginia—again a Jeffersonian creation—was the only American university founded on an original model; and the University of South Carolina was in the heyday of its glory. Only a sectarian conflict within the state prevented the University of Georgia from being equally important.

In sum it does not appear that the slavery system throttled intellectual life in the South; on the contrary, if, as the late Professor Parrington believed, our political literature is our national glory, the South played a part in shaping that literature which probably surpasses, and certainly equals, the part played by New England. There was a healthy intellectual life in Dixie; it so happened, however, that it did not express itself characteristically in *belles-lettres*. We must therefore lay the slavery system aside as an explanation for the failure of southern letters to be as important as one would like them to have been.

IV

But the difficulty with a political literature is that it fades with the passing of the issues out of which it is born. Only rarely does a Burke or a Webster transcend the issues of the moment; and for the most part the utterances of Southern leaders, though they draw the admiration of the historian, are permitted to gather dust. In the meantime

the great names in American letters continue to be Franklin, Bryant, Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, Poe, Whitman, all but two of whom are New Englanders by birth, and all but three of whom are part of the story of New England literature. And in considering the Golden Day of New England as compared with the Golden Day of the South, one is immediately confronted with the striking fact that, whereas the latter was nourished in politics, the former was nourished in religion. The literature of New England began with theological controversy. That theological controversy, nourished intellectual independence. As a result, late into the nineteenth century, New England protestantism continued to produce original writers—the Transcendental movement itself is, indeed, a phase of New England unitarian thought.

No student of Tyler's great history of colonial American letters can escape the conclusion that the connection between the church and the intellectual and artistic life of colonial New England was intimate, and that, in Professor Cairns' phrase, "it is easy to trace a continuous development from these pioneers in authorship to the New England of today." William Bradford's "History of Plymouth Plantation" relates the "spetiall worke of Gods providence in New England"; its phraseology is that of the Old Testament and the Book of Revelations. John Winthrop's "History of New England" is studded with remarkable and special *acta Dei* done through New Englanders. Edward Johnson's "The Wonder-Working Providence of Sion's Saviour in New England" is sufficiently described by its title. Not to speak of John Cotton, John Williams, Thomas Hooker, and the Mathers, Samuel Sewall's great diary is the record of spiritual travail, Jonathan Edwards, by common consent the profoundest philosophical writer in American history, is the product of religion, New England colonial poetry is overwhelmingly religious, and even Franklin is soberly concerned about unitarianism and God. In the

Revolutionary Era New England pulpits furnished the political orators with arguments and are among the major sources of propaganda in the epoch.

In the next generation figures like the Dwights carry on: Timothy Dwight's "Travels in New-England and New-York" is a four-volume report by a spiritual top-sergeant, and his "Theology Explained and Defended" in five volumes is a text book of spiritual strategy against deism. In the great efflorescence of New England letters, the Transcendental movement, which concerned Emerson, Alcott, Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Jones Very, and the rest, is fundamentally a militant unitarianism. A brooding consciousness of sin, it is a commonplace, is central in Hawthorne. Bryant, Whittier, Lowell, and Longfellow in their varying ways—they, too, express their feeling of the intimacy of God and man, Quaker or mystic, unitarian or trinitarian though their faith may be. Even among the politicians, as the "Diary" of John Quincy Adams amply shows, religion is central: at the opening of every New Year that embodiment of the New England conscience casts up his accounts with his Maker. Doubtless there is much aridity, much ungraciousness, even much hypocrisy in this literature, but there is behind it a driving force, an intellectual energy which is admirable; and the relative freedom for individual development which the characteristic revolutions of New England religious life permitted allowed the growth of philosophic doctrine and transcendental vision.

When now we turn to the South we find no such history. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Anglican clergy set up their chapels of ease in the upper South, quarrelling sometimes with colonial governments and sometimes with their parishioners, but, being themselves of the dominant English church, they lacked the fighting edge of Puritanism, that doomed and desperate cause. The story of Wesley's misadventures in Georgia is the story of an

emotional, not an intellectual, conflict; and as Methodism spread among the lower classes, it failed to develop intellectual energy, preferring instead emotional and irrational controls. Presently a great religious revival—evangelical Methodism, the Baptist movement, a renewed and often internecine Presbyterianism—flowed like a torrent over the South, throttling the intellectual daring of deism but substituting no philosophy in its place which could not be bounded by camp-meeting and revival, circuit-rider and personal conversion; and while doctrinal sermons which were exhibitions of intellectual energy were doubtless preached, the striking failure of the southern church was its failure to produce effective thinkers and a vital philosophy. The characteristic products of that church are perhaps Lee, one of the truest of Christian gentlemen, and Jackson, who would have felt at home with Cromwell's Ironsides, admirable men both, but not precisely philosophers; whereas the characteristic products of New England religion are its thinkers and its literary men.

The South may point with pride to the good and quiet lives of thousands of southerners, white and black, and argue that the southern churches have amply justified their existence. But though one may pay every tribute to their admirable work in the field of personal conduct, it is yet fair criticism that the concern of the southern churches has been more with morality than with thought, more with the beauty of holiness than with the holiness of beauty. The southern protestant churches have never developed a distinctive theology, and, naturally enough, have never produced a great theologian, a great philosopher, or a great moralist. Central as they are in southern life, they have to exhibit no great Christian poet like Milton, no great apologist like Newman, no great preacher like Hooker. What is even more curious, despite their profound interest in popular religion, the southern churches have not produced either a great religious book like "Pilgrim's Progress" or a great

hymn like "Lead, Kindly Light." In fact, a hostile critic of southern protestantism might say with considerable truth that in the intellectual field it is one of the least original, the least productive of the various branches of the Christian faith, and I fear that an honest apologist for the church would have the greatest difficulty in denying the truth of the accusation.

When therefore we see on the one hand the great line of New England writers linked through three centuries with the varying phases of New England religious life, and, on the other hand, behold the southern church in command of the intellectual life of that region and yet absorbing energy without giving it forth in the shape of productive thought and imaginative creation, the conclusion seems inevitable that one of the main causes for the relative poverty of southern letters lies in the failure of the church in this region to become the creative force in the world of the intellect which the church has elsewhere proved to be.

V

Let the cause be what it may, the newer movement in southern letters is certainly drawing no nourishment from religion. Profoundly significant because profoundly prejudiced is Mr. Herbert Asbury's "Up from Methodism." The prejudice is evidently due to the fact that Mr. Asbury feels that he must fight against an atmosphere of illiberal religiosity which has threatened to swallow up his individuality. The significance lies in the fact that Mr. Asbury's case is the case of most southern writers today. It is symptomatic. Indeed, most of them would stare in amazement if they were told that there is any necessary connection between religion and art. Phrased another way, however, the connection becomes clearer: there is a necessary connection between a point of view, a philosophy of life, and art, and the southern church has driven every important southern writer away from its point of view. The result may or may

not be bad for the writers, but is certainly bad for the churches and it is certainly bad for the South. For, antagonized by the illiberality of the churchly attitudes, infuriated by the acceptance of merely material advantages in the "business man's civilization" which the South has adopted, the southern writer is not southern at all; he is merely living in the South, and he happens to write of themes which take their local coloring from his immediate environment. The deep nostalgia which the writings of Mr. Allen Tate and Mr. John Crowe Ransom display for the civilization of the slavery system is one of the most revelatory aspects of the contemporary movement.

It seems to me therefore that southern letters will remain merely charming and interesting, merely regional studies and topical books, until such time as the South again stands for a significant idea. The slave civilization has crumbled, taking with it the political literature which it created. The southern church has failed to provide an adequate philosophy of life. The industrial movement in the South does not differ from the industrial movement elsewhere in the United States except as, being newer, it is cruder and greedier. If, however, the South can once more put forth a significant interpretation of life, if it can stand again for something that is coherent and whole, the promise of its artistic development may pass into fruition. Presumably that tradition must combine the two most important elements in southern history—the impressive structure of Jeffersonian social thinking, and the equally impressive history of an aristocratic life in the arts. Combined, they make up a program of liberalism—an ominous word, I know, but one which needs to be rehabilitated—in which it is possible that the South might make an important addition to national thought. But that is another story.